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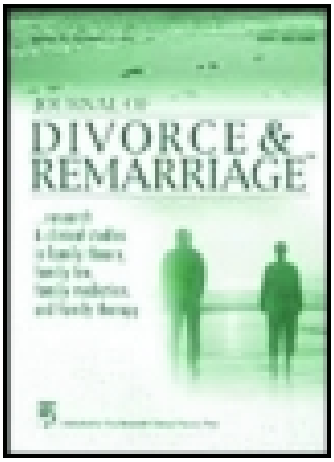

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Overcoming the Cinderella Myth

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Overcoming the Cinderella Myth: A Mixed Methods Study of Successful Stepmothers

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ABSTRACT. Using a family systems framework, a mixed methods approach was used to understand the challenges, resources and coping strategies of stepmothers. The Delphi method was used to identify the primary challenges of stepmothers. Ethnographic interviews with self-described "successful" stepmothers were then conducted to better understand these challenges and the coping methods and styles used to manage them. Analysis resulted in thematic content related to role and contextual challenges. Coping themes included the importance of positive communication, attitudes and attributes, marital quality, as well as formal and informal supports. Suggestions for researchers and practitioners are provided. doi:10.1300/J087v47n01_06 *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Stepmothers, roles, success, coping, stepfamilies

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INTRODUCTION

Americans born in the 1980s and 1990s have a one in two probability that they will be members of stepfamilies, either in childhood or as adults (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Because of rising divorce and remarriage rates, it is predicted that the stepfamily will be the predominant family form in the twenty-first century (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Glick, 1989). Behind these demographic shifts are complex social and kinship changes, which necessitate a host of adjustments (Whitsett & Land, 1992). Some scholars believe we know less about stepfamilies than any other family form (Coleman et al., 2000), especially the stepmother-stepchild relationship.

The majority of stepfamily research has addressed stepfather families, and the studies that have examined stepmothers have generally reported negative findings. For example, it is reported that stepmothers experience more difficulty than stepfathers adapting to their roles as stepparents (MacDonald & DeMaris, 1996; Visher & Visher, 1979). Studies report more confusion, conflict, and overall poorer adjustment among family members in stepmother families (Quick, McKenry, & Newman, 1994). The stepmother role is more ambiguous than that of the stepfather or biological parent and as a result, may negatively impact the quality of life for stepmothers and their families (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Weaver, 1999).

Cultural stereotypes of fairytale-type stepmothers present an image of a wicked, distant, or cruel parent. Other media representations reinforce the perception that stepmothers are less affectionate and loving than biological mothers (Weaver, 1999). The cultural idealization of mothering promotes the expectation that, as mothers, stepmothers should assimilate into the family immediately and love their stepchildren (Kurdek & Fine, 1991). Stepmothers are expected to be more involved in the parenting process than are stepfathers (Weaver, 1999). As a whole, little is known about how healthy stepmother relationships develop and what factors contribute to positive adjustment in stepmothering (Lejeune, 1998).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand the roles, challenges, attributes and coping strategies of self-professed "successful stepmothers." The following three questions guided the research: (1) What do stepfamily experts say are the major challenges for stepmothers? (2) How do successful stepmothers describe their challenges?

(3) How do successful stepmothers cope with and manage these challenges? These were answered in two stages: First, with the Delphi method, and second, through ethnographic interviews.

Theoretical Perspective

Guiding this research was a family systems perspective. This theory views families as part of an interdependent, emotional and relational system, the parts of which are interconnected and reciprocal, affecting different elements of the family system (White & Klein, 2002). Family systems theory is helpful in explaining roles and how each family member's role affects the quality of family interaction. Roles are not unilaterally determined but created and maintained through interactions between members and their environment. There are many roles and interactions in stepfamilies, and the complexity of these make systems theory a helpful framework for understanding stepfamily dynamics.

ROLES, CHALLENGES, AND COPING STRATEGIES OF STEPMOTHERS

The remarriage of a custodial father and the entrance of a stepmother creates a new role in the family that may be viewed by the children as a threat to the family roles that have already been established. This is especially true for children who remain close to the noncustodial mother or have a history of serious psychological or emotional problems (Nielson, 1999). Also problematic is the lack of clarity as to what a stepmother's role is in this new arrangement. As Pann and Crosbie-Burnett (2005) have stated: "In a stepfamily there are a variety of roles to be filled, a variety of adults to fill them, and no clear role prescriptions delineating the division of labor" (p. 260). The resulting role ambiguities can cause confusion, problematic interactions, and greater risk for poor adjustment among family members (Quick et al., 1994). Thus, attaining role clarity and role flexibility may be crucial factors in stepmothers' adjustment.

Existing research has highlighted some of the role challenges that stepmothers negotiate. For example, when comparing part-time and full-time stepmothers with a matched set of biological mothers, Nadler (1976) found that stepmothers report more depression and anger regarding family relationships than did biological mothers. Similarly, Santrock and Sitterle (1987) found that stepmothers' attempts to establish good

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relationships with their stepchildren were often problematic, and that stepmothers felt less involved with their stepchildren compared with mothers from intact families. Even though this group reported sharing many parental and child-rearing responsibilities and persistently tried to involve themselves with their stepchildren, these children tended to view the stepmother as somewhat detached, unsupportive and uninvolved in their lives.

Further insight into the role of stepmother as a parent is provided by Brown (1984) in an exploratory study of fifty-one stepmothers. This study revealed that the cruel stepmother image had a negative influence on the participants' self concepts and their behavior toward their stepchildren. While all the participants acknowledged the difficulties associated with the stepmother role, 72% described the role as primarily satisfying rather than dissatisfying. The most satisfying aspects as described by this group included (1) experiencing the rewards of mothering, (2) family relationships, (3) creation of a family unit, (4) having a larger family, and (5) limited parental responsibilities associated with the stepparent role.

Some have suggested that positive adjustment in stepmother families may require increasing social support and agreement between the stepmother and father on how to raise the child (Quick et al., 1994). Also, it has been found that stepmothers who cope well (1) spend more time with their stepchildren, (2) openly communicate and share with the child, and (3) continue to show care and concern for the child's overall well-being (Quick, 1989).

METHODOLOGY

Preliminary Analysis and Results

The Delphi Method was used to identify some of the primary challenges for stepmothers. This method uses structured techniques to gather insight from informed experts about issues, problems or situations relevant to a specific topic (Stone Fish & Busby, 2005). For the purposes of this research, these informed experts were members of the Institute or Research Faculty of the Stepfamily Association of America. Experts (n = 18) were sent surveys to gather their perceptions of the primary challenges for stepmothers. Eleven (61%) of the informed experts responded to the first stage of the Delphi Study questionnaire, which included a list of possible challenges stepmothers face. The experts rank

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ordered the top ten items that they felt were most challenging for stepmothers. These rankings were compiled and re-sent to the same 18 experts for their review and second ranking, with 12 (67%) responding to this phase of the survey. The returned lists were compiled and weighted, with those scoring highest comprising the top five challenges for stepmothers. The top five were (1) the lack of a clearly defined role for stepmothers resulting in unrealistic and/or poorly defined expectations, (2) husband's expectations concerning the stepmother's role, (3) issues related to the stepchild's biological mother, (4) lack of support and feedback and (5) quality of the marriage relationship.

Primary Analysis

The purpose of the next phase of the study was to understand how self-described successful stepmothers cope with and manage these challenges that are inherent to the stepmother role. Stepmothers were asked to identify coping strategies and supports employed in negotiating the challenges previously identified by the Delphi experts. The text from these interviews was analyzed using ethnographic methods, which are well suited for understanding experiences from an insider's perspective (Fetterman, 1989; Tedlock, 2000).

Participants. The sample was comprised of stepmothers who met the eligibility requirements, including: being married for at least five years to a spouse that has children from a prior marriage or relationship, and who describe themselves as "successful" stepmothers. The stepchildren may have resided with the stepmother or they could have been non-residential stepchildren. The biological mother may or may not have been involved in the children's lives or sustained a relationship with the ex-spouse. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, including requests in undergraduate classes and posted flyers. There were nine participants in the study. Demographically these stepmothers ranged in ages from 31 to 48 ($x = 39.4$), and had been married from 5.5 to 13 years ($x = 8.7$), with between 1 and 3 stepchildren ($x = 1.8$). All were Caucasian and roughly middle class.

Procedure. A member of the research team met with each participant in a convenient place, explained the project, obtained verbal assent and a signed informed consent. A semi-structured ethnographic interview guide (informed by the Delphi data) was used that followed the research questions (Tedlock, 2000). The interviews lasted one to two hours and also included a demographic questionnaire. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by members of the research team.

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Analysis. Analysis began by reading through the transcripts of interviews a section at a time. The research team examined the text line by line and electronically labeled it using qualitative software according to conceptual categories in a process of open coding (Tedlock, 2000). This process of developing ethnographic themes continued in an organic fashion, with some categories becoming more prominent and others remaining undeveloped. The analysis informed subsequent data collection in what is known as the constant comparative process (Newfield, Sells, Smith, Newfield, & Newfield, 1996). Developing themes were explored with other participants to confirm or disconfirm trends in the data. After the themes had become fairly well defined, they were examined for logical and conceptual relationships, in a process of axial coding (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Validity, or trustworthiness, was strengthened by the use of multiple reviewers and coders who independently and jointly analyzed the data (Tedlock, 2000). Memos were kept within the software to reflect thoughts about the research process and were included in the data analysis.

RESULTS

As was predicted from the literature and the Delphi analysis, the ethnographic analysis yielded considerable content related to the challenges of navigating the roles of a stepmother. These stepmothers talked of challenges unique to the stepmother context and of various role strains and conflicts. They also discussed what helped them succeed despite these challenges. The results will discuss both the role challenges and the coping strategies used to manage them. Primary themes that were identified within each of these areas are listed in the following section in italics, and quotes from the participants are used to illustrate the themes.

Role Challenges

The analysis of the interview content confirmed the significance of *role ambiguities* for many participants. As one stepmother explained "I knew that there were no real standards and that you just have to feel it through at the time." Another concurred: "I wish there was a reference manual. It would have been nice to [know] what am I supposed to do." Feelings of confusion and frustration were common among the stepmothers. Nearly all of them professed a sense of confusion and lack of

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direction about what their boundaries were with their stepchildren. One stepmother stated, "When I became a stepmom I [didn't know] how to be a stepmom" and another expressed, "I have never been a parent before, what am I doing?"

Related to the feelings of uncertainty came feelings of insecurity, and these were reinforced by the systemic dynamics of trying to fit into a new family without the shared history that the other members have. This at times resulted in a *lack of authority*: "you don't know how . . . authoritative you can be. You don't want to step on their mom's foot." Another common experience was feeling a *lack of membership* within the existing family: "[stepson] makes the comment, well, this isn't how my mom makes it [dinner]. It was that kind of thing that we had to get past." Another gap was the *lack of support* that many of these moms felt: "Anytime I did get feedback it was because I had done something wrong."

One difficulty in defining stepmothering roles was the varying expectations that each family member had for the stepmothers. For example, the husband, children and the stepmom herself may all have conflicting expectations of what to do in any given situation. This sometimes caused a piling up of expectations–role strain–or mutually exclusive expectations–*role conflict*. For example, one mother said "If [stepdaughter] is sick when she is down here, she wants comfort like [from] a mother. But if she needs someone to talk to about boyfriend problems, school problems etc., she want the big sister." This illustrates how some of the roles of the stepmother-child relationship such as *friend* or *confidant* conflicted with the *mediator* or *disciplinarian* roles. For example mothers suggested that "In the beginning you should just be a friend to the kids and see where that takes you" or "Sometimes, it's almost like I am the big sister she never had." But, at other times they needed to be a parenting figure, mediating and disciplining: "At first it was hard because I was always nervous about disciplining the kids. You know, would this make their mother mad or would it make my husband angry. But then, both my husband and the biological mother told me on several occasions if the kids are acting up then go ahead and discipline them." One mother captured the role conflict well: "I am not his mom and I am not his dad so he can come to me with stuff. . . . which has been kind of nice, but at the same time I am wondering, 'do I not tell his father about this stuff he is telling me? What is my role in that?'" Another eventually refused to serve as a confidant or a mediator because of these dilemmas: "I told them that they had to start talking to each other."

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Nearly all the stepmothers perceived themselves as *mother figures* in the sense of responsibility for the children, and a desire to be a *nurturer* or a *protector*. One stepmother said, "Those kids were like my own." Others said, "I've always considered her to be my daughter . . . [and] don't look at her as a stepdaughter because that implies they're not really your child . . . she's my only child and I just accept the fact that she has another mother as well," and "I still try to mother him, not be his mother, but mother him."

Some of the roles were more associated with the stepmother-husband relationship, such as the expectation to be a *supportive partner*, supporting the parenting, but not being directly involved. This role often would evolve into more of a *decision-maker* in the raising of their stepchildren. For example, "The biological mother and I are the ones to make all the decisions . . . he likes for us to take care of those things." Another stepmother stated "I think he kind of expects me to make decisions but I would run them by him anyway." Another role that some assumed was that of an *activities coordinator*, planning events for the family or helping negotiate visits between biological parents. The next section covers how stepmothers successfully manage these multiple roles and responsibilities.

Finding Success as a Stepmother

Attitudes and Attributes. An *accepting* attitude was mentioned as an important ingredient in stepmother and stepchildren relationships. These stepmothers thoughtfully planned how they would receive their stepchildren into their lives. They generally tried to be optimistic about stepparenting and tried to forge a relationship with their stepchildren built on mutual respect. One stepmother thought this was crucial: "My advice is not to get married if you don't like your stepchildren." Acceptance often included an acknowledgement that conflict is a healthy and normal part of loving relationships. "We may argue but we always come to an understanding on everything. Every relationship has to have disagreements." Validation of various viewpoints and styles was part of accepting differences in perspectives and roles.

Other attitudes and attributes included being *honest* and *open*. "Listening and . . . not criticizing, but reflecting back on what they have said and how it seems to be making them feel and maybe commenting on it is reinforcing, not judging." One stepmother stated, "There was some conflict between my husband and I, but [we tried] to be open." *Forgiveness* was identified by some as important in moving beyond the conflicts. One

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stepmother suggested: "say you're sorry, ask for forgiveness and understand that it doesn't occur easily." Some highlighted the importance of *shared values* with their spouse, particularly regarding children and child rearing. "Pick a spouse that you can really trust their [parenting]." The attitudes and attributes that family members have were directly related to the skills that they use during communication.

Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills. "[When] everyone gets along, it makes the kids' life easier and less stressful." For these mothers, communication styles and conflict resolution skills were crucial to their identity as a successful stepmother. *Communication to clarify* was one common strategy that paid off in reducing misunderstanding and role conflicts. As one mother remembered, "I let [my husband] know that I needed some expectations, I wasn't sure . . . what I was supposed to do. Was I supposed to be a mom or not be a mom?" These stepmothers often attempted to clarify their roles with their stepchildren, especially in relation to the biological mother. This helped to clarify boundaries and strengthen the relationship. Some learned this lesson the hard way after misunderstandings occurred. One stepmother said, "We didn't discuss having children much before we got married." Another remembered: "Early in our marriage, he would make decisions without talking to me about it. But now he does talk to me about it, which I appreciate and expect."

Finding mutually agreeable methods to resolve challenging situations is the essence of *communication for conflict resolution*. Although conflict styles differed among the participants' families, they generally agreed that communication was needed in order to move forward. For example, one stepmother shared this strategy: "We would never go to bed mad. We would talk about everything and eventually things would be fine. Good communication is the key." Another recalled how she improved in this regard over time: "Sometimes you have to figure out how to ask something in a certain way so not to raise certain defenses."

Communication was facilitated through *time together,* meaning quality time spent as a family. "The best vacation we ever had was when the four of us went to Aruba last year . . . It does not [threaten the spousal relationship] when the kids are around, it is just more fun. We always find our own time anyway." One-on-one time with children was recommended also: "Give your child quality time because it is important. I wish I would have been a little better at that."

Formal and Informal Supports. "A well grounded support system is one of the biggest things . . . where you can be honest and express your feelings." Nearly all of the stepmothers agreed that the existence of a

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strong social support system was important to their success as stepmothers. The types of support received fell into four categories, their *spouse, family and friends*, the *biological mother* and *spiritual* supports.

Throughout the study, the marriage relationship was important in determining the quality of emotional support received by the stepmothers. One stepmother said, "As for my husband, I have always had his support when it comes to the kids and everything else that I do." Stepmothers who felt like their husbands were supportive of their role as a stepparent tended to spend quality time together, share similar values and were friends as well as marital partners. "My husband and I are like two peas in a pod. He is my best friend as well as the man I love." Many of the stepmothers commented on the importance of nurturing the marriage relationship in order to promote a strong marital bond and present positive role models to their children. One stepmother recommended, "Marriage to me is a job, you have to work at it and make it right. Each party has to work together and that was very hard for both of us . . . it takes teamwork to make a marriage work."

Being accepted by their extended family was also important to many stepmothers. From mothers-in-law to sisters and stepsiblings, validation, encouragement and physical support was mentioned as helpful. One stepmother stated, "My mother-in-law is just sweet . . . she is thankful. And my brother-in-law thinks I walked on water." Receiving positive feedback and advice was important in countering the social stigma felt by some stepmothers. "I'd call my sister and say 'well when they're this age are they suppose to be doing this?' or 'is this different?'" Family and friends provided the stepmothers with a shoulder to cry on, a break from daily responsibilities, positive reinforcement, gratitude, and community.

Biological Mothers. As predicted by the Delphi experts, one challenge that many stepmothers negotiated was their relationship with the biological mother. It seemed that finding a positive relationship with the biological mother was an important aspect of feeling successful for many of these stepmothers. Some worked at supporting the biological mother's needs, which paid off for the stepchildren. "I was the go between. I called her . . . because it is very important that she be in their lives. They need her." One commented, "We are not best friends or anything but there are no hard feelings between us either." Feelings of animosity between the ex-spouses and poor communication kept some stepmothers from developing a supportive relationship with the biological mother. Nevertheless, almost all of these stepmothers reported

that they sought to act in the best interest of their stepchildren, while trying to respect the biological mother's role.

Spiritual Support. A reliance on spiritual support, whether in the form of prayer, institutional (church) support, programs, or personal beliefs helped many stepmothers in facing the challenges of stepfamily life. One mother explained: "Without my mother and my Sunday school, there have been times when it would have been very easy for me to get very selfish and self-centered." Some found that the fellowship of structured programs fulfilled a spiritual need while supplying them with solutions and feedback for their problems. Other stepmothers recognized a more personal relationship with a higher power as being indispensable in meeting their marital and parenting needs. In dealing with her own insecurity and jealousy in her relationship with her stepdaughter one stepmother said, "I have treated her a lot like she was my own natural child but, I will accept whatever she is willing to give. That was after God broke me about my jealousy." Another stepmother suggested, "The Lord is really in this marriage." Some found security and purpose in their role as a stepmother, and others felt that spirituality helped them develop needed attributes (e.g., patience, love) such as those discussed previously.

DISCUSSION

Implications for Researchers

A central purpose of this study was to generate more accurate and in-depth information on successful stepmother families. By giving voice to these stepmothers, we hoped to add information to a little understood area in stepfamily research, namely: Stepmother role challenges and how these can be successfully coped with and managed. The themes identified suggest many areas that could be pursued in future studies.

While past research has illustrated the impact of stepfamily stigmatization and myths, future research could continue to explore the role of contextual supports for stepmothers. For example, there were many ecological factors that influenced how these stepmothers adjusted to their role in stepfamily life. These formal and informal supports could be studied in more depth to explore relationships between coping and context. It has previously been argued that a lack of strong social support systems can contribute to stepfamily dissolution (Visher, 1994),

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and according to this study these supports need to be both in and outside the family. Questions to pursue could include: How does a stepmother's social network affect her level of stress and coping? What is the relationship between religiosity and coping ability? Is this different from church activity? Do formal stepfamily support groups reduce tension and dissolution among stepfamilies? Are certain therapeutic approaches more appropriate for stepfamilies than others? How does the relationship between the biological mother and the family influence the stepmother's ability to cope or feel successful?

Nearly all of the stepmothers acknowledged the significance of communication in supporting them in the stepparenting role. This supports other research that indicates that healthy communication in stepfamilies is a crucial factor in promoting stepfamily stability and satisfaction (Grinwald, 1995). Family researchers should continue to examine how couples and stepchildren use communication to clarify their roles, manage conflict and problem solve. This could include exploration of how character traits, attitudes, and attributes affect the communication that occurs in stepfamilies (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, do higher levels of patience or commitment to the marriage translate into less conflictual interactions? Are better skilled communicators also those with more positive attitudes and attributes?

While research has linked marital happiness to positive stepfamily adjustment certain aspects of marital quality have not been discussed in examining stepmother families. For example, what is the importance of spending time together as a couple? How can being friends in the marital relationship promote security? What are the benefits of having shared values between spouses? How does marital commitment affect stepparent/stepchild interactions? Also, the same questions we explored here could also be used to explore stepfather families.

Implications for Practitioners

This study adds credence to the previous literature that suggests that stepmothers experience more difficulty than do stepfathers in adapting to their role (e.g., Visher & Visher, 1979). Practitioners who read this literature can better understand these difficulties from an insider's perspective. For example, research that emphasizes stepmother resources and coping skills can help counter the tendency that some professionals have to focus on deficits (Coleman et al., 2000). Also, understanding the ambiguous nature of stepmother roles can help practitioners give adequate attention to the systemic complexity and diversity of stepfamilies.

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For example, research suggests that it takes 5 to 7 years for a family to stabilize following a remarriage (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Papenow, 1988; Visher & Visher, 1990). A practitioner could help normalize the challenges during this stabilization period, and offer supports in the form of skills or resources.

These mothers had a lot to say about the importance of communication, which implies that this could be a helpful area for a practitioner to attend to. Other scholarship suggested that skills without virtues or positive attributes are insufficient (e.g., Fowers, 2001; Peterson & Selegman, 2004), and it would be helpful for communications training to include not only skill development, but also attention to personal attitudes and attributes. Better communications training could be incorporated into practitioner workshops, support groups, or family therapy for stepfamilies.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Although the information provided by the participants was rich and multi-dimensional, it is unlikely that all stepmothers' experiences would fit these descriptions. Although this deep-but-not-broad quality is inherent to ethnographic research, it is important to remember that another group of mothers would have shared variations on these themes, and that the emergent content is created in interaction with the researchers. Future research could explore these questions with a more diverse sample of stepmothers, which could help determine if these findings can be generalized to other populations of stepmother families. Another challenge is that the definition of successful was self-determined by those who chose to participate in the study. This left a broad interpretation of successful which was difficult to operationalize and measure.

Despite the limitations, the findings of this study add useful information to those who are interested in better understanding the experiences of stepmothers, either from a personal or professional role. These mothers' experiences suggest that despite challenges, there are many ways for stepmothers to find success and thrive in the step-parenting role. Given that many people both now and in the future will find themselves in stepmother families, it is important to continue to learn more about the unique challenges and resources that they have.

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